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Matter of Fact

Stalin's Mantle Could Be a Pall

By Joseph and Stewart Alsop

RUMORS of the impending death of Stalin are an annual crop, and the present heavy harvest has produced the customary reaction among the American experts. They will believe the story when it has been officially announced. Nevertheless, since the expectation that Stalin must someday die is an important point of American foreign policy, it seems to be worthwhile to set down the known facts.

In the first place, those Americans who have the best means of forming a judgment consider that Stalin has been far from completely well for some years. At one of the wartime conferences, he actually confessed to President Roosevelt that he had trouble with both his heart and lungs. After Tehran his plane was unexpectedly grounded at Baku, whence he returned by rail to Moscow. The reason for this, and his subsequent refusal to travel anywhere by air, is thought to have been the sharp effect on his lungs of flying at altitude.

In the second place, however, the same men admit that Stalin may last a long while yet. As his frequent trips to Sochi indicate, he has been taking excellent care of himself since the end of the war. His holidays invigorate him greatly; when Secretary of Commerce Averell Harriman visited Sochi during the greatest of all outbursts of "Stalin is dying" talk, he found the Russian dictator looking better than he had for years. And everyone who has ever seen Stalin regards him as one of the toughest specimens of the tough Georgian race. Thus there is no telling whether this crop of rumors, or the next one, or the one after that, may be right or wrong.

Molotov's Three 'Controls'

MEANWHILE, whatever reliable facts can be obtained on Stalin's health have an interest far greater than mere gossip. Stalin's death is in fact considered likely to produce changes in Soviet policy. The argument for this view is as follows:

After Stalin is removed from the world scene, the experts expect the control of the Soviet Union to pass to a sort of inner committee of the Politburo. According to this theory, Molotov will be Stalin's official heir, inheriting the outward trappings of leader of the Soviet state.

Beria, meanwhile, will control the MVD—the changed but unchanging secret police; the Russian Communist Party will be headed by Zhdanov, hero of the Cominform organization meeting; and to Bulganin will go the leadership of the Russian military forces. In other words, while Molotov will get the trappings of power, the fundamental

History teaches, and the experts believe, that there can be no stability in this quadripartite division of the power of an autocratic state. What is anticipated was suggested by State Department Planner George Kennan in his famous "Mr. X" article. There will be a conflict, paralleling the conflict that convulsed Rome after the death of Augustus. Then the Roman imperial house, the senatorial plutocracy, the state bureaucracy and the legions fought it out together, until only the legions survived to rule the empire.

Clash of Personalities

THE INEVITABLE similarities of the situation that will obtain in Moscow after Stalin's death are strikingly obvious. Moreover, in this modern case the conflict should be all the more embittered by each of the different forms of state power being personified in a single individual.

The prediction is that this inner conflict will rage in the Kremlin from the day of Stalin's funeral for an indeterminate but probably considerable period. There will probably be several permutations and combinations—first three against one, then one against two, and so on. And at last another sole ruler will be chosen for the Soviet Union by the ruthless law of the survival of the fittest.

What interests the experts about these struggles is, of course, their probable effect upon the Soviet state and power. The best prediction is that the form of the Soviet state will remain always outwardly unaltered, whatever dark melodrama may be enacted within the Kremlin's guarded walls.

Post-Lenin Precedent

BUT IN SUCH struggles the starting points, at least ostensibly, are always disputes over policy. In the similar contest which took place after the death of Lenin, both the Soviet bureaucracy and the Communist parties at home and abroad were constantly rent and riven by policy disputes.

These were chiefly mere outer manifestations of the Stalin-Trotsky rivalry. Yet the end result was the temporary crippling of the Communist Parties outside the Soviet Union, and a drastic change in the Soviet Union's foreign policy. The Stalin theory of "socialism is one country" was officially adopted, while the NKVD hounded all dissenters to the fitting end of heretics.

No wonder Stalin's health is now a subject of such intense interest; for his death is also considered likely to result in another great change in the direction of Soviet policy. No one is predicting, but all are hoping for the best.